



**DOC  
NOMADS**  
JOINT MASTERS

DocNomads-12  
2023-25 /2nd semester (Budapest)

## DH / ETHICS IN DOCUMENTARY

### Instructors

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### Course description

The filmmaker's ethics profoundly defines his or her documentary practice. By analysing a selection of sample films, the students learn how to recognize and manage ethical issues.

The course focuses on the screenings and class discussions of about 12 documentaries or film excerpts that raise ethical questions.

The analysis of these films and conducted preparatory research give students additional knowledge about how to build and maintain a relationship with film participants, whilst enlarging their awareness of ethical issues they will likely meet in their documentary practice.

2ND SEMESTER (BUDAPEST)

# Course Schedule

## 1. February 15. 10.00-13.00

Subject: **Art and politics - How to confront your characters?**

Films:

- Ray Müller: The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl (1993, 180 min)
- Vít Klusák: The White World According to Daliborek (2017, 105 min)

Other examples:

- Talal Derki: Of Fathers and Sons (2017, 103 min)

Discussion:

- Is there a general ethical regulation or does the director set the rules according to their moral feelings and taste?
- Are there certain things we cannot make films about or everything is approachable just have to choose the right form.
- Where is the line between documentary and propaganda?
- Can art be detached from its context?
- Where does your responsibility lie as a filmmaker? Are you accountable for the effect that your film may cause?
- How can you handle it if your character does not tell the truth? Should you confront them?

## 2. February 19. 10:00-13:00

Subject: **Dedication or manipulation**

Films:

- Michael Moore: Bowling for Columbine (2002, 120 min)
- Michael Moore: Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004, 122 min)

Other examples:

- Louie Psihoyos: The Cove (2009, 87 min)
- Mads Brügger: The Ambassador (2011, 93 min)
- Alexander Nanau: Collective (2019, 109 min)
- Davis Guggenheim: An Inconvenient Truth (2006, 96 min)

Discussion:

- Where is the line between creative use of the facts to underline your story and manipulation? What convincing techniques we can use and what are the ethical concerns around them?
- Can we lie even if we tell the truth? Can we lie if we say the truth, but keep quiet about some other things?

- What if we change the order of events?
- Can you put your opinion as a fact?
- Do the ends justify the means?

### 3. February 21. 10:00-13:00

Subject: **Defenceless people in documentary films**

Films:

- Andrzej Celinsky, Hanna Polak: The Children of Leningradsky (2005, 38 min)
- Alexander Nanau: Toto and His Sisters (2014, 94 min)

Other examples:

- Christian Sønderby Jepsen: Natural Disorder (2015, 98 min)
- Carlo Zoratti: The special need (2013, 84 min)
- Jurek Sladkowski: Don Juan (2015, 92 min)
- Zana Briski, Ross Kauffman: Born into Brothels (2004, 85 min)
- Ágnes Sós: Granny Teri (2003, 58 min)
- Botond Püsök: Too Close (2022, 85 min)

Discussion:

- How can we make films about those who cannot consciously agree (children, senile, on drugs, etc.)?
- Where is the limit of an observational style, when should you intervene if ever, or can you stay in the background?
- Can you use your characters to achieve a higher purpose?
- You are not a social worker but a filmmaker, still, how much your responsibility is?
- Can you interact with the situation, helping your characters if needed, or does it change the reality?
- Do you have to take action or your filmmaking is your action?
- Can you move on when the film is done?
- Where is the line between an NGO film and a documentary film?

### 4. February 22. 10:00-13:00

Subject: **Intervention of the Director**

Films:

- Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami: Sonita (2015, 90 min)
- Vít Klusák, Filip Remunda: Czech Dream (2004, 90 min)

Other examples:

- Bernadett Tuza-Ritter: A Woman Captured (2017, 89 min)
- Anna Zamecka: Communion (2016, 72 min)

Discussion:

- How far a director can go to protect their protagonist?
- Can you intervene or should you not change the events?
- Can you take on the responsibility for the effects of your intervention in the long run?
- What happens after you finish the film?
- Should you, as a documentary filmmaker, always be honest about your intentions?
- Is it okay to mislead your characters even if it is for their interest, for a larger good/to raise awareness? Can you behave as superior, who knows better what is the best for the characters?
- Can you lie to get through your message?
- Can you make fun, of or ridicule your characters?

### 5. February 23. 10:00-13:00

Subject: **The director as a family member**

Films:

- Monica Csango: Forever Yours (Evig Din) (2006, 52 min)
- Jonathan Caouette: Tarnation (2003, 88 min)

Other examples:

- Alan Berliner: First Cousin Once Removed (2012, 78 min)
- Doug Block: 51 Birch Street (2005, 90 min)
- Sarah Polley: Stories We Tell (2012, 108 min)
- Réka Kincses: Balkan Champion (2007, 89 min)

Discussion:

- What are the dangers of being too close?
- What happens if the film becomes more important than the family relations?
- How can we misuse the genuine trust?
- How far can we go? Do we have the right to force them to face information that they don't want to? Can we open their eyes with force?
- Where is the line between personal and private?
- Do we have the right to publish the archive/diary/memoir of our family members?

### 6. February 23. 14:00-17:00

Subject: **People who we do not sympathize with or agree with - judge or not to judge?**

Films:

- Joshua Oppenheimer: The Act of Killing (2012, 115 min)
- Andrew Jarecki: Capturing the Friedmans (2003, 103 min)

Other examples:

- Ulrich Seidl: In the Basement (2014, 81 min)

- Veronika Lišková: Daniel's World (2014, 75 min)
- Heidi Ewing, Rachel Grady: Jesus camp (2006, 84 min)

Discussion:

- How to deal with preconceptions or even prejudice?
- Is it possible to not take sides and stay objective? Is it necessary at all?
- Should we hide if we dislike somebody or some situations or should we be open about it?
- How to deal with blame or the opposite, trying to prove somebody is innocent? Can we take this responsibility?
- Can we give a platform to the “antagonist” as well to tell their side? Can we show them likable?
- What are our responsibilities when we portray them, should we keep in mind the potential educational effects of these films?

## Assignment

Each student must choose one film from the given list during the course. These films will be discussed during the classes. The students have to write an essay from the chosen film and send it to the teachers and the class 2 days before the date when that film will be discussed. The essay should be 900-1200 words long and focus on the ethical dilemmas and aspects related to the film. The students should evaluate the film based on these ethical criteria and also should be able to support their point of view with relevant arguments. They have to identify three main aspects they would like to discuss during the class and mark two segments from the chosen film (5-10-minute-long parts) that best reflect on their highlighted aspects and they would show to their classmates. The students should also mention some other examples from film history in which similar ethical problems were raised and solved either similarly or in a different way.

The students can use different sources to write this essay but, in each case, please refer to the original material. However please note that during the evaluation process, we appreciate a lot the original ideas and arguments, so we suggest thinking further about the read materials. The students should present their point of view verbally as well during the class. It should be a summarized version of their written essay, concentrating on the main points of their argument. Later during the open discussion, they should engage with their classmates, react to their questions and raisings, and support their point with arguments if necessary.

## Evaluation

Written essay 40 %

Verbal presentation 30%

Presence and active participation in the open discussions during the classes 30%

## Literature

Barry Hampe: *Making documentary Films and Reality Videos*, Ontario, Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd.

Bill Nichols: *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Michael Rabiger: *Directing the Documentary*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Focal Press, 1992.

Aufderheide, Patricia & Chandra, Mridu & Jaszi, Peter: *Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work*, Center for Social Media, School of Communication, American University, 2009.

Butchart, Garnet C.: *On Ethics and Documentary: A Real and Actual Truth*, Communication Theory, Volume 16, Issue 4, November 2006.

Grønstad, Asbjørn: *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, Palgrave, 2016.

Gross, Larry P., & Katz, John Stuart, Ruby, Jay: *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Nash, Kate: *Documentary-for-the-Other: Relationships, Ethics and (Observational) Documentary*, Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality Volume 26, 2011.

Nash, Kate: *Telling stories: the narrative study of documentary ethics*, New Review of Film and Television Studies, Volume 10, 2012.

Piotrowska, Agnieszka: *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*, Routledge, 2014.

Ruby, Jay: *The Ethics of Image Making, or, „They’re Going to Put Me in the Movies, They’re Going to Make a Big Star Out of Me...“*, New Challenges for Documentaries (Second edition) edited by Aan Rosenthal & John Corner Manchester University Press, 2005.

Sanders, Willemien: *Documentary Filmmaking and Ethics: Concepts, Responsibilities, and the Need for Empirical Research*, Mass Communication and Society, Volume 13, 2010.

Sanders, Willemien: *The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking: An Empirical Turn*, New Review of Film and Television Studies, Volume 10, 2012.

Wheeler, Thomas H.: *Phototruth Or Photofiction?: Ethics and Media Imagery in the Digital Age*. Routledge, 2010.

Whitehouse, Ginny: *Newsgathering and Privacy: Expanding Ethics Codes to Reflect Change in the Digital Media Age*, Journal of Mass Media Ethics, Exploring Questions of Media Morality, Volume 25, 2010.